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ABSTRACT

This digest identifies seven essential elements of effective programs for students in alternative programs because they have dropped out, are at risk for dropping out, or have behavior disorders that require special education outside the general education setting. Such alternative programs offer flexible curricula that can address the unique social, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and vocational needs of each student. The seven essential elements are: (1) functional assessment that identifies student strengths and skill deficits; (2) functional curriculum that meets the student's individual needs; (3) effective and efficient instruction aligned with functional assessment measures and the curriculum; (4) transition into and out of the alternative setting; (5) comprehensive systems that coordinate special education and treatment services; (6) appropriate staff, resources, and procedural protections for students with disabilities as required under the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; and (7) supportive climate in which students feel welcome, safe, and valued. (DB)

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By

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Special Education in Alternative Education Programs

Mary Magee Quinn, Robert B. Rutherford, Jr., and David M. Osher

With the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 105-17), the mission of alternative programs has expanded from the education of youth who have dropped out, or who were at risk for dropping out, to students with disabilities whose behavior warrants special attention outside the general education setting. These programs now provide alternative programming, including flexible curricula that can address the unique social, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and vocational needs of the individual student. In contrast to the traditional alternative settings where students were "sent away," many communities are offering alternative programs within the public school setting.

While there are numerous models for serving students with disabilities in alternative programs, there are seven essential elements of effective programs (Quinn & Rutherford, 1998; Rutherford, Nelson, & Wolford, 1985): (1) functional assessments; (2) functional curriculum; (3) effective and efficient instructional techniques; (4) programming for effective and efficient transitions; (5) comprehensive systems; (6) appropriate staff, resources, and procedural protections for students with disabilities (Rutherford & Howell, 1997); and (7) educational climates that are supportive of the student's social/emotional needs (Quinn, Osher, Hoffman, & Hanley, 1998).

Functional Assessment

Assessment of student needs for the development of educational and treatment plans is essential to successful alternative programs. Functional assessment procedures identify student strengths and skill deficits that interfere with educational achievement and social/emotional adjustment. This form of assessment is based on identifying students' needs in relationship to the curriculum and to their individualized education program (IEP), rather than on global achievement and/or ability measures.

Functional assessment is also a continuous process, not static, and results can be used to make systematic adjustments in the student's educational program (Howell, Fox, & Morehead, 1993). Assessment procedures should include curriculum-based evaluation and measurement procedures to monitor overall student performance and improvement. To accomplish this assessment, the academic and social skills curricula for the student must be clarified and implemented.

Functional Curriculum

A functional educational curriculum allows the program to meet a student's individual academic, vocational, social, and behavioral needs. Such a curriculum focuses on the student's general curriculum and IEP. In addition to academic skills, this curriculum can include developing functional job-related skills, daily-living skills, and social skills. While most alternative education programs do not have comprehensive vocational programs on site, the development of basic work skills tied to job-related social- and life-skills training is often an important component of a student's IEP. Effective alternative programs sometimes provide the opportunity for part-time employment and access to vocational training in the community.

In addition, the student's IEP team should review and revise the IEP to include goals that directly relate to the behaviors that warranted the placement in the alternative setting. These goals should be based on a functional behavioral assessment and should lead to a positive behavior intervention plan.

Effective and Efficient Instruction

Functional instruction uses positive and direct student-centered instructional strategies, which are aligned with functional assessment measures and the curriculum. In this situation, instruction specifically addresses the short-term objectives in the student's IEP that are based on the results of the functional assessment, as well as the standards specified in the general education curriculum. Student progress toward mastery of these objectives and standards is monitored using ongoing data collection procedures.

Effective and efficient instruction can also involve the use of behavior strategies for meaningful intervention in alternative classrooms. Behavioral interventions include a variety of procedures to teach acceptable replacement behaviors, enhance and support appropriate behaviors, and reduce inappropriate behaviors.

Transition

The transition of students and their educational records into and out of alternative settings is important. Staff in the public and alternative settings can make a major contribution to the transition process by providing comprehensive information concerning the strengths and needs of their students and assuring that there is follow-up and continued support for students in the new settings. It also is important to include the results of any functional behavioral assessment and the positive behavioral intervention and support plan that addresses the specific behaviors that warranted the placement in the alternative setting.

The public school, the alternative setting, and other community-based or residential program staff must share the responsibility for transition of students into and out of alternative education programs. Planning for transition as soon as the student enters the alternative

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setting ensures that the student is taught the necessary skills and is provided with the necessary supports. Further, functional transition plans and meaningful transition objectives should be a part of the student's IEP.

Comprehensive Systems

Comprehensive systems provide coordinated special education services to eligible students in alternative settings. Alternative programs can offer a continuum of education and treatment services (e.g., direct instruction, pull-out programs, therapeutic programs) to best meet the individual needs of students who qualify for special education.

In alternative programs with separate education and treatment functions, it is important that staff develop common goals and objectives for student success. In addition, coordinated and comprehensive linkages must be developed among the public schools, the alternative education program, the student's family, and social service agencies. Unless agencies collaborate, programs often lead to fragmented services for these youth. Educational, social service, juvenile justice, and mental health agencies must be linked by providing a system of "wraparound" programming (Eber, 1997) where coordinated, cooperative, and comprehensive services are implemented to serve students with disabilities. Wraparound programming is a process for developing realistic behavior plans linking the student, the alternative program staff, families, public school personnel, and staff of the different social service agencies (Woodruff et al., 1998).

Appropriate Staff, Resources, and Procedural Protections for Students with Disabilities

The 1997 Amendments to IDEA contain new regulations about sending students to alternative educational settings for drugs, weapons, or "substantial evidence that maintaining the current placement of the child is substantially likely to result in injury to the child or to others..." (Section 300.521). As a result, the number of students in alternative programs could increase. Therefore, some of the education staff of alternative programs should have special education certification, and support staff should have extensive training in how to serve students with disabilities. Multidisciplinary education and treatment teams also must be established in alternative schools and programs.

In addition, special education programs in alternative settings must provide a full continuum of educational services, including instruction in academics, independent living skills, social skills, and work related skills, and assure procedural protections, including parental notification of evaluation and parental involvement in the review and revision of IEPs.

Supportive Climate

Since students and staff are more productive in environments where they feel welcome, safe, and valued (Gottfredson, 1997), alternative settings should actively provide each person with the skills and supports necessary to create safe, productive, caring environments. In effective alternative settings, everyone is treated with respect and problem behavior is viewed as an opportunity to teach new skills (Quinn et al., 1998).

Summary

It is still unclear how alternative programs will translate the policies promulgated by the 1997 Amendments to IDEA into practice. It is certain, however, that alternative programs around the country will have to make some significant changes to their operating procedures. Without a doubt, when alternative programs focus on providing the seven essential elements of effective alternative programs as discussed in this digest, they are more effective at meeting students' needs.

Note: This digest was prepared in collaboration with the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice as part of its information exchange efforts. For more information on issues related to children and youth with emotional or behavioral problems and their families contact the Center at: 1000 Thomas Jefferson St., NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20007 or visit their website at: www.air-dc.org/cecp

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